

**Amendment to the Claims:**

The following listing of claims will replace all prior listings in this application.

Listing of Claims

1. (Currently amended) An acidified, shelf stable, non-fermented, dairy-based food product comprising:

a casein source;

~~an acidifying agent~~ an acidulant comprising one or both of acidic calcium sulfate or sodium acid sulfate;

a sufficient amount of a masking compound to mask acid-induced casein precipitates;

about 60-75% water,

wherein the pH of the food product is no more than about 4.6, and wherein the water activity is greater than about 0.85,

whereby the food product ~~does not possess a~~ is substantially free of harsh flavor.

2. (Currently amended) The food product of claim 1, wherein the masking compound comprises a gum, and wherein the food product comprises a sufficient amount of gum such that the food product does not possess a lumpy texture.

3. The food product of claim 1, comprising a ready-to-eat food product.

4. (Currently amended) The food product of claim 1, wherein the food product comprises a sufficient amount of acidulant such that the food product is rendered shelf stable without the use of high heat.

5. (Currently amended) The food product of claim 1, wherein the food product ~~contains an acidulant with a~~ has a pH of less than about 4.

6. (Currently amended) The food product of claim 5, wherein the ~~food product contains an acidulant with~~ has a pH of between about 0.1 to 1.5.

7. (Currently amended) The food product of claim 6, wherein the ~~food product contains an acidulant with~~ has a pH of between about 0.1 to 0.22.

8. (Currently amended) The food product of claim 1, wherein the food product comprises a cheese sauce, and wherein at least a portion of the casein source comprises natural cheese.

9.-13. (cancelled)

14. (Currently amended) The food product of ~~claim 13~~ claim 1, wherein the gum masking compound comprises a cellulose gum.

15. (Currently amended) The food product of ~~claim 13~~ claim 1, wherein the gum masking compound comprises a combination of cellulose gum and guar gum.

16. (Currently amended) The food product of ~~claim 13~~ claim 15, wherein the food product ~~utilizes~~ comprises a about 0.1% to about 0.6% by weight gum to masking mask the casein precipitates and other textural defects in the food product.

17. (Currently amended) The cheese sauce of claim 8, ~~comprising between~~ wherein the natural cheese comprises about 2-6% by weight of the food product ~~natural cheese.~~

18. (Currently amended) The food product of claim 1, wherein the food product comprises ~~about or less~~ no more than about 2% salt.

19. (Currently amended) A non-fermented, dairy-based cheese sauce comprising:

about 2% to about 6% by weight natural cheese;

about 5% to about 9% by weight dairy protein;

about 0.5% to about 2.5% by weight of one or both of sodium acid sulfate or acidic calcium sulfate;

about 60-75% by weight water, and

about 0.1% to about 0.6% by weight of masking compound comprising a combination of cellulose gum and guar gum,

wherein the masking compound masks casein precipitates and other textural defects in the food product, and

wherein the pH of the food product is about 3.0 to about 4.6, and wherein the water activity is greater than about 0.85,

whereby acidified not having an the cheese sauce is substantially free of associated substantially harsh flavor or substantially lumpy texture, and rendered shelf stable without the use of high heat.

20. (Withdrawn) A process for forming a non-fermented, shelf-stable, dairy-based, acidified food product, comprising the steps of:

combining various ingredients including water and natural cheese to form a mixture; and

introducing hydrated starch, steam and an acidulant to the mixture to form the acidified food product

21. (Withdrawn) The process of claim 20, wherein the food product is derived by mixing natural cheese in a weight range of about 2-6% and water in a weight range of about 60-75%.

22. (Withdrawn) The process of claim 20, further comprising the step of adding a gum to the mixture, the gum masking textural defects caused by casein precipitation.

23. (Withdrawn) The process of claim 20, wherein the food product comprises a food sauce.

24. (Withdrawn) The process of claim 20, further comprising the step of pasteurizing the acidified food product.

25. (New) The food product of claim 1, wherein the acidulant comprises sodium acid sulfate.

26. (New) The food product of claim 1, wherein the casein source comprises dairy protein, and wherein the dairy protein comprises about 5% to about 9% by weight of the food product.